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Dubious Protection Sought for Satellites

The Pentagon is quietly pressuring commercial satellite operators to take costly precautions against terrorists and pranksters, even though many industry officials are convinced the safeguards are unnecessary and a waste of money.

The controversial satellite-security policy, put in effect by Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger a year ago, is based on a presidential directive. It requires operators of commercial satellites who want to lease channels to government agencies or contractors to meet expensive standards approved by the National Security Agency for all satellites launched after 1989. The intent is to protect the satellites from unauthorized commands that could disrupt communications related to national security.

The directive gives a military-led government task force the authority to protect all types of government information and communications. As we previously reported, critics contend that it could also put the vast amounts of computerized information on individuals under the control of the military.

Assistant Defense Secretary Donald Latham disagrees and argues that the precautions are essential to protect sensitive government information. Because not all government information falls into existing categories of classification, the directive created a new category—not yet defined—of material that can be kept from the public. The Pentagon has denied that the category is for embarrassing information.

That may be so, but the ominous direction the policy could take is suggested by the fact that the

National Security Agency refused to let our associate Donald Goldberg see documents that described the debate—even though the documents are not classified.

We obtained the documents from other sources, and they turned out to contain no information that could remotely be considered dangerous to national security. But they did include embarrassingly candid criticism of the satellite policy by executives of major satellite companies. These industry experts complained that the Pentagon's policy was "vague" and questioned whether "such a mandate was in the best interest of the country."

The minutes of a closed-door meeting of industry and government officials on Jan. 29, 1985, make one thing clear: The Pentagon's insistence that its security standards are necessary left the industry representatives totally unconvinced.

For example, when the government argued that terrorists could wreak havoc by sending false commands to a satellite with their own electronic equipment, an industry expert offered a devastating rejoinder: Terrorists could achieve their purpose much more simply by heaving a grenade over the fence of a satellite facility.

The company reps were understandably concerned about who will foot the enormous bill for the NSA-directed satellite security. The government's answer confirmed their worst suspicions: The satellite industry will pay.

A Pentagon study three years ago found that protecting satellites to conform to NSA standards could add \$3 million to the cost of a satellite and \$1 million a year to its operating expenses.